

GATEWAY TO GLORIETA

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A History of Las Vegas, New Mexico.

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SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



The south side of the Plaza before the fire of 1877 (*Museum of New Mexico*)

spreading after it had destroyed only three buildings on Center Street.

Another fire, which started in a store on the corner of Railroad and Tilden in May 1882, damaged nine other properties, mostly residential, before it was checked. At that time, the volunteers had ordered a hose cart, but it had not yet arrived. The new cart, which came in June, helped the firemen to control two big blazes in November and December of that year, after one had destroyed a wholesale house and the other a saloon. As the two companies of volunteers acquired experience and equipment, they became more effective, so that time and time again they were able to extinguish fires that might have been disastrous—that is, until December 1891 and June 1892, when two more blazes, fanned by high winds, did serious damage in the same neighborhood.

The “plagues” were epidemics of smallpox. The first of record occurred in 1877, when the known deaths numbered eighty-two. All work in Old Town came to a halt, and a boy of that era recalled years later that his father had used his wagon to haul the dead to the graveyard—thirty of them in one day. The next scourge hit in 1882—the first year of the temporarily incorporated city. In August, the governing body immediately adopted an ordinance to quarantine the sick, and the county commissioners did likewise in October.



Leaving town during the smallpox scare of 1898 (*Rex Studio*)

The city also ordered all dance halls closed and established a "pest house" out in the country. No record was made of the number of cases quarantined, but at the pest house, the city physician and special nurse cared for seventy-seven patients, of whom twenty-eight died. Municipal expenditures for those emergency services amounted to \$5,330.44. By the time of the next scare, in 1886 (and again in 1889 and 1898), many citizens had been vaccinated, and the few cases were so promptly segregated that the disease was effectively checked.

Amid the troubles of those years, citizens were obtaining services from local units of government set up in the American pattern, and the operation of those governments had the by-product of provoking more troubles.

Wealthy, well-educated *dons* quickly adapted to the new system by acquiring control over many voters under the *patrón* system. Years later, a pioneer described how a *don* who

owned much of the land around San Gerónimo employed many of the men seasonally in his freighting business, remunerated them with goods charged out of his store at high prices, and then from his profits paid for their weddings and funerals and even sent some of their children to school in town. One can imagine how all of his part-time employees humbly cultivated his favor even to the extent of casting their votes as requested by him.

By 1880, the sons of Miguel Romero, founders of a flourishing mercantile business and owners of extensive properties, had commanded control of the Republican Party in San Miguel County. When Lorenzo López challenged their leadership, beginning in 1882, great contests occurred in the county conventions between him and Eugenio Romero, his brother-in-law. Either Romero or his brother Hilario came off with the party nomination for the office of sheriff, which then was tantamount to victory, until in 1890, when López finally stormed his way to election to that office, which in those days was the one reserved for the county "boss." Two years later, a new Peoples' Party, or Populists, temporarily broke the control of the Republican *dons* and merchants in a bitter campaign in which the candidates of that party were supported by a new newspaper, *La Voz del Pueblo*.

In Old Town, the maintenance of order in the early 1880s was the duty of two deputy sheriffs, one of whom was designated as *jefe de policía* by the county commissioners. In 1881, police regulations provided that each deputy would get, besides his salary of \$35.00 a month, one *peso* for each arrest and fifty *centavos* for each conviction. On the east side, the businessmen raised a fund by subscription to employ two merchant policemen, who held appointments made by the probate judge. Sometimes they and the deputies had nasty conflicts over the question of the realm of their jurisdictions.

The need for many improvements during the great boom led immediately to discussion about the possibility of incorporating a municipal government that would serve both communities. The editor of the *Gazette* on the west side, J. H. Koogler, favored it, whereas the editor of the *Optic*, Russell A. Kistler, opposed it, because the east side, "full of activity

and enterprise" should be governed "by Americans only," as he put it. However, in 1882, when a group of citizens presented a petition for the incorporation of one city, he changed his tune, because, he claimed, "the best classes of people are for it."

It came about, therefore, that in July, 1,097 men cast their votes in an election in a consolidated city in which Eugenio Romero won the office of mayor. That outcome did not please his rival, Lorenzo López, who challenged him in a poorly conducted, farcical election in December of that same year—1882. Election clerks chosen by those who arrived first at each polling place had no registration lists for determining the eligibility of voters. When some young men heard that the two polling places on the west side were running up a total of 1,800 votes, whereas there were approximately only that many eligible in the entire city, they voted all of the names in a city directory. The partisans of Romero then claimed that legally no election had been held and therefore the incumbents should continue in office, while López sought to unseat them by protracted court action in which he contended that the municipal government had been founded illegally in the first place. That was a strange reversal on his part, because he had been a member of the committee that had presented the petition for consolidation to the county commissioners.

Under a cloud of legal uncertainty, the city fathers did improve the streets and did crack down on gambling and prostitution, but the smallpox epidemic in 1882 called for such unanticipated expenditures that they bankrupted the young city. Next, while a decision in court was still pending, in 1884, the legislature adopted a new municipal code by which all municipalities were disincorporated so that they could reincorporate under the new rules. All were expected to do so immediately, but in Las Vegas, the previously troubled government folded up without any effort to reincorporate.

In the interval when all of Las Vegas was again under county administration, the county commissioners had a new stone courthouse built on the west side in 1886 and had a new iron bridge constructed across the Gallinas River a year later.